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Working for Free Pays Off for Caring Lawyer

Bruce Zucker chooses to provide pro bono legal aid to poor tenants over more prestigious work, and it has become his life's passion.

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Nothing in Bruce Zucker's upbringing seems to have prepared him for his life's work defending the poor.

A tall, athletic man who favors pleated khakis and starched button-down shirts, Zucker grew up in an upper-middle-class enclave in the west San Fernando Valley, far from the poverty he now sees every day.

At Taft High School and UCLA, Zucker said, the closest brush with poverty was reading newspaper articles about unscrupulous bosses withholding wages from garment district workers.

Before graduating from Loyola Law School in 1993, Zucker interviewed with a prestigious Santa Monica law firm and deftly matched wits with the partners over lunch at an upscale restaurant. Yet as he chatted amiably with the partners, something wasn't quite right.

"I just didn't get the impression that they were really happy," Zucker said. "They seemed to be more passionate about their weekend plans than the work they were doing."

After the meeting, Zucker realized he had to ask himself some fundamental questions. What was his life's passion? What work would be so satisfying that he'd do it for free?

He found the answer as he recalled his schooling. Zucker remembered the elation he felt in law school, when he helped resolve a landlord-tenant dispute while volunteering at a legal aid program.

"There was no big, dramatic event in my childhood that made me want to help poor people," Zucker said. "But it doesn't take a bleeding heart liberal to rally behind a cause and do the right thing."

Today, Zucker has dedicated his career to helping poor people gain access to quality legal representation. He is a full-time business law professor at Cal State Northridge, where in 1998 he founded the Justice Center, a hands-on program where students earn course credit by helping low-income people with landlord-tenant disputes. Through the center, about 30 indigent clients a year receive free legal help, ranging from filling out documents to receiving representation in court.

The 35-year-old Northridge resident also serves as supervising attorney at the Van Nuys Self-Help Legal Access Center, a two-room office in a prefabricated building in the shadow of the Van Nuys Courthouse where the impoverished go to resolve all manner of legal problems.

On a recent morning at the center, a lawyer dispensed advice in Spanish about divorce proceedings to a dozen people seated around a conference table. A law student and a client huddled over a stack of papers. And two female volunteers tended to people at a counter while other clients sat at computers downloading forms from the Internet.

Zucker, who volunteers at the center several days a week, was recently honored for volunteering more than 150 hours in free legal services to the poor -- more than three times the time donated by most practicing attorneys, he said.

The State Bar of California presented Zucker with its 2002 President's Pro Bono Service Award for his volunteer work with tenants' rights issues. The award was established in 1983 to give statewide recognition to attorneys for providing pro bono legal services to the poor.

Zucker was nominated by the Van Nuys center and the Ventura County Superior Court, where he has served as a temporary judge in Small Claims Court and has volunteered with a court-sponsored program for at-risk high school students.

Being acknowledged by his peers was a thrill, Zucker said, but his greatest honor comes from earning praise from his students.

"Professor Zucker is a huge advocate for the little man," said Nicole Blackman, 21, a senior business major at Cal State Northridge. "He is one of those people who wants to see good things happen to good people."

The toughest challenge in defending the poor is focusing on a case's merits and not on a client's circumstances, Zucker said.

"I am a lawyer, and my job is to protect the interests of my client, but some cases don't have merit and I have to let them go," he said. "I don't take every case, but I take the clients seriously."

On a recent morning at the Legal Access Center, Zucker sat at a small table with Jacqueline Green, 41, of North Hollywood. The single mother was trying to avoid being evicted.

"He is treating me like gold," Green said. "He is a kind, nice-hearted man. He doesn't care if you are on public assistance: He's willing to help."

Although he is doing what he loves most, Zucker said, at times, he gets worn down by his

clients' overwhelming poverty. To relieve the burden, he frequently goes for long drives or talks shop with his wife, Kiren Dosanjh, also an attorney and Cal State Northridge professor.

Looking back, Zucker said he doesn't regret his decision to dedicate his career to defending the poor.

"Someone once said, 'Get a job you love, and you'll never work a day in your life,' " Zucker said. "I believe it's more important to get a job you are happy with and let things flow from there."